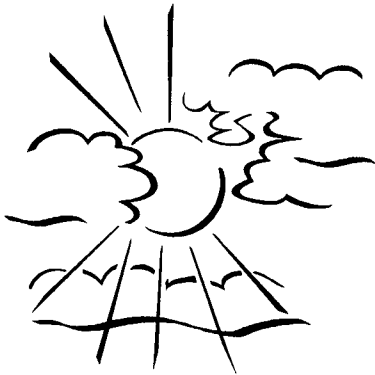


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Thursday, February 2, 2006

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Michigan feels bite of federal budget cuts

Thursday, February 02, 2006

By Sarah Kellogg
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Michigan college students and their parents will pay higher interest rates on student loans beginning in July if legislation approved by the U.S. House is signed into law. The House passed the bill by a narrow margin Wednesday, 216-214, and it now goes to President Bush for his signature. The measure would reduce federal spending between 2006 and 2010 by \$39 billion, including \$12.7 billion in student aid reductions.

"It's hard enough borrowing now, but when you're going to be paying higher interest rates, it's going to be so much worse," said Rep. Dale Kildee, D-Flint, who opposed the bill. "No matter how you say it, \$12 billion means there will be fewer students going to college."

Under the bill, student borrowers would have a new fixed interest rate of 6.8 percent beginning July 1, and parent borrowers would see their rates fixed at 8.5 percent.

Beyond the student loan implications, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 is considered by many to be the first effort by GOP leaders to restrain federal spending in large entitlement programs such as **Medicare and Medicaid**.

"This is a modest but important step towards reducing the deficit and getting back to a balanced budget," said Rep. Dave Camp, R-Midland. "Despite the heated rhetoric from both extremes of the political spectrum, I am confident that this bill strikes the appropriate balance between meeting our obligations to care for the elderly, the poor and the nation's children and our obligation to prudently expend public tax dollars."

Included in the \$39 billion in cuts is \$6.4 billion for **Medicare** and \$7 billion for **Medicaid**. State officials estimate Michigan would lose about \$1 billion in federal aid over the next five years if the bill becomes law.

"Once again our leadership in Washington has let us down," said Liz Boyd, press secretary to Gov. Jennifer Granholm. "These massive cuts will push Michigan's safety net toward a dangerous tipping point."

Some Democrats were outraged by the bill, saying that Republicans were pushing the cuts to help offset billions of dollars in tax cuts that benefit wealthier taxpayers and corporations.

"Look at what the (Republicans) did," said Rep. John Dingell, D-Dearborn. "Vote against it. This is an outrage."

Part of Michigan's \$1 billion loss would come in the area of **child support** enforcement. The state would lose an estimated \$250 million in federal matching dollars for child support administration over five years.

Ultimately that could hinder state efforts to collect child supporting, costing Michigan as much as \$1.2 billion in collections between 2006 and 2015, according to the Center for Law and Social Policy, a liberal policy group in Washington.

Most of the last-minute objections to the legislation came in the days before the vote from student and consumer groups who were predicting dire consequences to the interest rate hikes.

"A college education is already prohibitively expensive for many, and the proposed cuts to federal student aid programs will only intensify many students' struggles to pay for college," said Shari Pomerantz, a spokeswoman for Students for PIRGIM, the student branch of the Michigan consumer interest group.

House Approves Budget Cutbacks of \$39.5 Billion

By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG
The New York Times

Published: February 2, 2006

WASHINGTON, Feb. 1 — House Republicans eked out a victory on a \$39.5 billion budget-cutting package on Wednesday, with a handful of skittish Republicans switching their votes at the last minute in opposition to reductions in spending on health and education programs. The vote helped President Bush deliver on his promise to rein in federal spending while underscoring deep anxiety within his party over cutting social welfare programs in an election year.

The measure represents the first major effort by lawmakers since 1997 to cut the growth of so-called entitlement programs, including student loans, crop subsidies and Medicaid, in which spending is determined by eligibility criteria.

It passed 216 to 214, with 13 Republicans voting against. The Senate, with Vice President Dick Cheney casting the decisive vote, approved the spending cuts in December. The bill now goes to the White House for Mr. Bush's signature.

Coming on the heels of the State of the Union address, the vote was a critical test of Mr. Bush's ability to hold his fractured party together.

The House also voted Wednesday to extend the broad antiterrorism bill known as the USA Patriot Act until March 10, giving House and Senate negotiators time to settle differences on another of Mr. Bush's priorities, a measure to revamp the act and make it permanent.

The spending bill, which covers a five-year period ending in 2010, will achieve savings of \$6.4 billion in Medicare, the health care program for the elderly, through a variety of changes that include higher premiums for all beneficiaries, with steeper increases for the more affluent and a freeze in payments to home health care providers.

In the Medicaid health care program for the poor and disabled, \$4.8 billion will be saved in part by increasing co-payments and reducing payments for prescription drugs.

Mr. Bush said that he looked forward to signing the legislation and that the budget proposal he would send to Congress on Monday "will continue to build on the spending restraint we have achieved."

After years of cutting into social programs, the budget vote spotlighted how difficult it will be for Mr. Bush to press ahead with even deeper cuts this year. While the bill has strong appeal to fiscal conservatives who are Mr. Bush's Republican base, it makes party moderates nervous — so much so that four switched their votes to oppose the bill after intensive lobbying from advocacy groups over the holiday break.

Determined to see the measure pass even as they knew it would make life tough for party members, Republican leaders waged their own intense lobbying campaign. Representative Roy Blunt of Missouri, the Republican whip and acting majority leader, could be seen on the House floor deep in conversation with his colleagues as the roll was being called, apparently counting votes until the last minute so he could determine which moderates could be released to vote no.

With House leadership elections set for Thursday, Mr. Blunt, the front-runner for majority leader, had a personal stake in the outcome.

"Clearly, if we hadn't won it would be a huge thing," Mr. Blunt said after the vote. "But it's really not about me. It's about the members coming back and taking a very tough vote."

So tough that some moderates who voted in favor of the measure later felt compelled to defend themselves. Among them was Representative Sherwood Boehlert, Republican of New York, who called it "a very agonizing" decision. But Mr. Boehlert, one of three Republicans to vote against a recent tax-cutting bill, said he had become convinced that entitlement programs must be revamped before they gobbled up the entire federal budget.

"The present course is unsustainable," he said. "We can't keep cutting taxes and cutting revenues, while cutting programs to protect the most vulnerable in society."

But conservatives, who pushed hard within their caucus for the cuts, were delighted.

Representative Mike Pence, Republican of Indiana, a leader of a group of House conservatives, called the vote "a step toward restoring public confidence in the fiscal integrity of our national legislature."

With the Senate taking up a tax-cutting measure at the same time, Democrats used debate on the measure to sound what will be a major election-year theme: that Republicans are cutting taxes for the rich at the expense of services for the poor.

"A vote for this bill is a vote, literally, to take away from health care from our children so we can give more money to the super-rich," Representative Louise M. Slaughter, Democrat of New York, said.

At a time Congress is consumed by a lobbying scandal, Democrats complained bitterly that the measure had been written without them, with the help of paid representatives from the drug and insurance industries, and then presented for a vote before they had a chance to review it.

"This is a product of special interest lobbying," said Representative John D. Dingell, Democrat of Michigan, "and the stench of special interests hangs over the chamber as we consider it today."

The budget-cutting bill is actually a holdover from last year. It first passed the House just before Christmas in an all-night marathon session. The vote was 212 to 206, with nine Republicans joining 196 Democrats and one independent in opposition. The bill then went to the Senate, which made a few minor changes, forcing the House to reconsider it on returning this week. Those tweaks, and the resulting delay, gave groups like AARP, which represents retirees, and Americans United, a progressive advocacy group that fought Mr. Bush's plan to revamp Social Security, time to mount an aggressive campaign against the cuts, and they did.

Brad Woodhouse of Americans United, said his group ran more than 300 events nationwide during the Congressional winter recess "to create the type of wave we created against the privatization plan." John Rother, AARP's policy director, said his group had run print advertisements and focused on Congress members in swing districts.

Mr. Rother said AARP objected in particular to a provision in the bill that would temporarily strip Medicaid coverage from elderly nursing home residents if they had given away money in the previous five years. The provision would cover money given to charity, he said, or to a grandchild for tuition; recipients would lose coverage in an amount equal to what they had given, he said, adding that lawmakers were often surprised to learn of the language.

"It's really punitive — inhumane is the other word I would use," he said. "I think a lot of these guys had no idea that was in there when they voted on this." Still, he said it had been difficult to

persuade lawmakers to switch their votes. "It's tough for these people to say openly, 'I made a mistake; I didn't know what I was voting on.' "

The four who did were Representatives Rob Simmons of Connecticut, who announced his decision last week, Jim Gerlach of Pennsylvania, John E. Sweeney of New York and Jim Ramstad of Minnesota.

In a statement after the vote, Mr. Gerlach said he was "very concerned about how the legislation reduces funding for mental health and education as well as important health care areas that will ultimately target our nation's most needy citizens."

Budget Cuts Pass By a Slim Margin

Poor, Elderly and Students to Feel Pinch

By Jonathan Weisman Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, February 2, 2006; Page A01

The House yesterday narrowly approved a contentious budget-cutting package that would save nearly \$40 billion over five years by imposing substantial changes on programs including Medicaid, welfare, child support and student lending.

With its presidential signature all but assured, the bill represents the first effort in nearly a decade to try to slow the growth of entitlement programs, one that will be felt by millions of Americans. Women on welfare are likely to face longer hours of work, education or community service to qualify for their checks. Recipients of Medicaid can expect to face higher co-payments and deductibles, especially on expensive prescription drugs and emergency room visits for non-emergency care. More affluent seniors will find it far more difficult to qualify for Medicaid-covered nursing care.

College students could face higher interest rates when their banks get squeezed by the federal government. And some cotton farmers will find support payments nicked. State-led efforts to force deadbeat parents to pay their child support may also have to be curtailed.

Yesterday's 216 to 214 vote, largely along party lines, gave a much-needed boost to President Bush, who is trying to reassert his control over domestic policy despite a series of legislative setbacks and near-record-low approval ratings. Bush had pushed many of the changes since he unveiled his 2006 budget proposal a year ago.

Thirteen Republicans joined 200 Democrats and one independent in voting against the measure. All Republican House members from Maryland and Virginia voted for the measure, while all Democrats voted against it.

The victory was seen by some as helpful to House Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) on the eve of a leadership election that he hopes will elevate him to House majority leader. A defeat could have rekindled questions over Blunt's ability to round up votes and manage the House floor.

Republican leaders said passage was a critical step toward containing the runaway growth of entitlement programs, including Medicaid and Medicare, that threaten to consume the budget as baby boomers begin to retire. "American taxpayers, and anyone concerned with the nation's long-term fiscal stability, have won a great victory today," said House Republican Conference Chairman Deborah Pryce (Ohio).

But Democrats blasted the White House and Republicans for allowing states to reduce Medicaid coverage and boost fees for Medicaid programs for the poor and disabled at the same time the president is calling for making permanent tax cuts for wealthy Americans.

The fight over the bill exposed deep divisions between conservative Republicans who drove many of the policy changes and some GOP moderates worried that the cuts hit the poor too hard. The House passed the measure at 6:07 a.m. on Dec. 19 after a grueling night of last-minute negotiations. Vice President Cheney cast the tie-breaking vote Dec. 22 to secure passage in the Senate by the narrowest of margins, but Democrats were able to make minor changes, forcing yesterday's House vote.

That gave opponents more than a month to pressure House moderates to reconsider their votes, and it allowed new analyses to surface. In recent days, separate Congressional Budget Office documents estimated that Medicaid changes would impose new costs on 13 million poor recipients and end insurance coverage for 65,000 Medicaid enrollees, that cuts to federal child-support enforcement funds would shift costs to the states and eliminate billions of dollars in child-support payments, and that changes made to the Senate-passed budget package saved private Medicare insurers \$22 billion over 10 years.

Those reports reinvigorated Democratic charges that the budget measure exemplified a congressional culture that protects the moneyed interests and their well-connected lobbyists at the expense of the unrepresented poor.

"This bill is Exhibit A for special interests and lobbyists writing legislation behind closed doors at the expense of the ordinary citizen," Rep. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.) said yesterday.

But with the federal budget deficit expected to rise again this year, to around \$360 billion, Republicans implored their members to take what Rep. Adam Putnam (R-Fla.) called "this first step toward long-term, fiscal discipline and fiscal health for our government."

The impact of the bill on the deficit is likely to be negligible, slicing less than one-half of 1 percent from the estimated \$14.3 trillion in federal spending over the next five years. As the House debated the budget-cutting measure, the Senate moved to begin final negotiations with the House on a package of tax cuts and extension of expiring tax cuts that could cost up to \$60 billion over five years, more than negating the savings from the budget bill.

"I do not know how anyone can say with a straight face that when we voted to cut spending in December to help achieve deficit reductions, we can now turn around a short while later to provide tax cuts that exceed or cancel out the reduction in spending," Sen. George V. Voinovich (R-Ohio) said yesterday, as the Senate took up a procedural motion that would allow tax-cut negotiations to begin. "We cannot afford these tax cuts."

The policy changes in the budget legislation are significant. The bill allows state governments to impose new co-payments and deductibles on Medicaid recipients, a power sought by governors of both political parties to try to slow the exploding costs of the health program. It makes it far more difficult for middle- and upper-income seniors to attain Medicaid coverage for nursing care by transferring assets to family members, then pleading poverty.

The bill will end federal payments to the states for the administration of child-support enforcement efforts. It will allow some interest rates on student loans to rise and fall with the market, squeezing student lenders and, in some cases, college students. And it will make changes to the basic welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, that would push states to tighten work requirements for women on assistance, a provision pushed hard by the administration for nearly four years.

It will also raise billions of dollars through an auction of the broadcast spectrum that will facilitate the spread of digital television while reserving more space for emergency response broadcasts.

And it will repeal a law -- considered illegal under international trade rules -- that directs payments of some import duties to the companies impacted by unfair trade practices. Instead, those duties will go to the U.S. Treasury.

Rule could kick millions of people off Medicaid

Citizenship proof could be required

February 2, 2006

BY PAMELA BROGAN
GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON -- Gertrude Myers, 93, who depends on a federal check to pay for her nursing home care, worries that budget cutters in Congress want to kick her off Medicaid because she doesn't have a birth certificate or a passport.

Myers is among millions of poor senior citizens, African Americans, Hurricane Katrina victims, children, rural residents and mentally ill people who face new obstacles to enroll in Medicaid under a budget bill that passed its last hurdle in Congress on Wednesday. President George W. Bush is expected to sign it into law.

One provision would require all 50 million Medicaid recipients to have a passport or birth certificate to be eligible for the federal insurance program for poor people beginning in July. The provision is aimed at keeping illegal immigrants from enrolling in Medicaid. But it creates burdens for elderly people like Myers and other U.S. citizens who might not have a birth certificate or passport.

"I don't have nothing," said Myers, whose bills at the Greene Haven nursing home in Springfield, Mo., have been paid by Medicaid for 5 years. Myers recalled that she was born at home in Danville, Ill. She said she's never had a birth certificate.

Myers' 75-year-old daughter, Jacolyn Peterson of Joplin, Mo., said her mother has received Social Security benefits for decades and shouldn't have to worry about proving her citizenship in her twilight years. "I think it's terrible" what Congress is doing, Peterson said.

Under current law, 47 states allow people who apply for Medicaid to self-attest under perjury of law that they're citizens. Noncitizens already must provide documentation that shows they're legal immigrants.

But Rep. Nathan Deal, R-Ga., who cosponsored the identification provision with Rep. Charlie Norwood, R-Ga., said state laws are too loose.

Deal called his provision a "reform that is long overdue." He said he's trying to restore confidence in government by making sure that federal dollars are spent appropriately.

Critics, he said, "don't like the fact that people should have to prove they are citizens to get social benefits" by providing a birth certificate or passport.

A report last year by the Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General found that state laws that let people declare their citizenship "could allow false statements of citizenship to go undetected."

But the report didn't recommend states drop the practice, or require birth certificates or passports as proof of citizenship. Instead, it recommended that states do more to verify claims that people are citizens by checking records.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates the Deal provision would save the government \$735 million over 10 years. Critics argue that the savings would accrue because fewer eligible U.S. citizens would enroll in Medicaid because they lack the proper paperwork.

Advocates for low-income people said the requirement is particularly harsh because there are no exemptions, even for those with severe mental or physical impairments.

"It's going to hurt low-income people and keep them off Medicaid," said Leighton Ku, a health policy analyst with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "That's the point," he said. Ku's group estimates as many as 4 million low-income people could lose their health insurance or face delays in getting coverage because of the provision.

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, a coalition of civil rights groups, said the measure "raises significant civil rights concerns" because it discriminates against Southern black people born before 1940 whose mothers were denied access to hospitals because of discrimination.

One study shows as many as one in five African Americans born around 1940 lack a birth certificate, the conference said.

House OKs budget bill that would cut services

- Dozens of money-saving changes in federal entitlement programs ranging from child support enforcement to nursing home eligibility for the elderly cleared the House on Wednesday in a 216-214 partisan vote.

Medicaid health services for poor people, Medicare health coverage for elderly people, welfare benefits, student loans and agricultural commodity subsidies are among the programs targeted for \$39 billion in savings over five years.

House Democrats were unanimous in opposing the bill. Republican supporters said warnings were exaggerated and the budget savings are long overdue.

Among the provisions:

- Divorced parents who depend on child support will have a harder time compelling payments from deadbeat ex-spouses because of a cut in federal funding for enforcement.
- Parents who use a federal loan program to finance their child's college education face a higher fixed interest rate of 8.5% instead of 7.9% starting July 1. Students who take out loans also may face higher costs if lenders, who are being asked to operate with reduced profit margins, decide to pass along their costs.
- Proposed rules for senior citizens seeking Medicaid coverage for nursing home care require that assets held five years earlier be counted to cut down on fraud involving asset transfers to family members.

Gannett News Service

How to be heard

- To contact House members: Call 202-225-3121. Or write to a member in care of: U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515.
- To send e-mail: Constituents can send e-mail to their representatives by going to www.house.gov/writerep.

Medicaid cuts, welfare reform target poor

By Daniel C. Vock, *Stateline.org* Staff Writer

Governing.Com

Thursday, February 2, 2006

Welfare recipients and the nation's poor requiring health care are in for some jolting news from Washington, D.C.

The Republican-led Congress sent President Bush Wednesday (Feb. 1) a package of Medicaid and welfare reforms that will impose tougher work requirements on welfare recipients and will squeeze \$6.9 billion in savings from the giant government health insurance program, in part, by getting poor patients to pay more for treatment.

The GOP muscled the measure through Congress without a single Democratic vote, clearing the House 216-214 Wednesday after squeaking through the Senate in December on a 51-50 tally with Vice President Dick Cheney casting the deciding vote.

The controversial measure meets many of the items on the wish list of the nation's governors for reining in the runaway costs of Medicaid, which covers 53 million poor Americans who are young, pregnant, disabled or elderly.

It also fulfills states' calls to officially extend the federally financed welfare program, called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

But the legislation has drawn fire from Democrats, including governors who helped push for Medicaid reform, because it jeopardizes social services for the poorest Americans.

Last year, the nation's governors mounted an aggressive campaign to convince lawmakers to rein in the costs of Medicaid, the \$338 billion federal-state program that covers more Americans than any other health insurance carrier.

The bill awaiting Bush's signature, which is likely, contains many of the items they championed: It lets states make patients pay more for prescription drugs and hospital visits. It makes it harder for seniors to give away their money and then ask the government to pay their nursing home bills. And it squeezes drug companies to give states better deals on medicines.

The final package also includes changes in the rules governing TANF, the cash assistance program for poor families, to impose tougher work participation standards and greater federal scrutiny over state welfare-to-work programs. It also trims federal funds for child support enforcement, which Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack (D) told *Stateline.org* was his biggest concern because parents who now depend on those checks would look to states for more social services if their child support no longer arrives.

The budget bill that cleared the House Wednesday would save the federal government \$35 billion over the next five years, according to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

Of that, more than \$6.9 billion would come from cost controls for Medicaid. States would likely save nearly that much for Medicaid, too, because states and the federal government share costs for the program. The savings amount to less than 1 percent of Medicaid spending.

But states still can expect their Medicaid bills to go up. States projected that their Medicaid costs would level out at 5.5 percent this year, after six years of growing more than 7 percent. The rapid increases have gobbled up state budgets, and states now shell out more money on Medicaid than they do for elementary and secondary education, when including federal money spent by the states.

Diane Rowland, executive director of the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, said the philosophical shift in the congressional changes was more significant than the legislation's financial impact.

Traditionally, Medicaid was designed to offer broad-based protections for the low-income people it covers. But the latest retooling, which authorizes co-payments and premium increases, brings it more in line with recent moves by Bush and private insurers to give patients more control directing their health care, she said.

The rationale for using “cost consciousness” to drive down health costs may not work with people living in poverty, Rowland said. Families living on \$16,000 likely would just forego medicine or a doctor’s visit instead of paying a premium, she said.

“They already have a lot of cost consciousness,” Rowland said. “This introduces fiscal responsibility on those who can least afford it.”

The “cost-sharing” measures would affect about 13 million people – or about a fifth of those on Medicaid – by 2015, according to CBO estimates.

Further, states would be allowed to charge monthly premiums to families who are slightly better off (\$24,900 for a family of three). The CBO projected it would lead to 45,000 enrollees leaving the program or never applying in the first place by 2015.

Another piece of the legislation would target seniors who shed assets in the five years before applying for Medicaid. Many seniors turn to Medicaid to cover nursing home care, and, indeed, roughly two-thirds of patients in nursing homes are on Medicaid.

Such treatment is extremely expensive. Obtained privately in New York, for example, it could cost more than \$64,000 a year. States want seniors to pay for as much as their own care as possible and penalize those who donate their money and property before asking for government assistance.

The new law will clamp down on that practice.

First, it allows the states to look back five years, instead of three, when a senior applies to Medicaid to find out whether they’ve given away their assets.

Second, it requires those who gave away property to sit out for a certain penalty period, depending on the size of the gift, starting the day they applied for Medicaid. The penalty used to start on the date of the transfer, making it moot in many cases.

Advocates for the elderly worry that the changes will leave seniors without a way to pay for care when they need it most. A grandparent who gives money to a grandchild for college or donates money to a church may not anticipate that he would be in a nursing home within five years, they point out.

The provision is also troubling to the nursing homes themselves.

Many patients enter nursing homes paying for their care but then rapidly run out of money. Usually, they turn to Medicaid, and the program then picks up the tab. But if Medicaid won’t pay their bills, the nursing homes may be forced to absorb the costs until the patient qualifies for aid. For many reasons, legal and ethical, nursing homes can’t and won’t kick out patients already under their care.

“Ultimately, what the problem is, is that you’re shifting responsibility ... back to the provider,” said Jonathan Eames, executive director of the Washington Health Care Association, a group of 350 nursing homes and assisted-living facilities in Washington state.

Still, the costliest and most immediate impact of the legislation will be on drug companies. The states obtained more leverage with the pharmaceutical industry under the bill, including a new formula for the baseline price they pay for drugs for Medicaid patients and more information from the drug makers about the prices they charge.

The CBO estimates those changes would lead to nearly \$3.6 billion in savings to the federal government, which pays about 57 percent of Medicaid expenses nationally. States would save nearly the same.

Send your comments on this story to letters@stateline.org. Selected reader feedback will be posted in the Letters to the editor section.

Contact Daniel C. Vock at dvock@stateline.org.

Lawmakers hear Granholm's plan to insure 500,000 residents

2/1/2006, 6:38 p.m. ET

By DAVID EGGERT
The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Some Republican lawmakers were skeptical Wednesday as state officials discussed Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm's proposal to provide health insurance to more than a half-million low-income residents.

The plan would not increase state spending or taxes, state Department of Community Health Director Janet Olszewski said during a joint Senate committee hearing. It would cover uninsured people with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty line. That's \$38,700 for a family of four and \$19,140 for a single person.

Medicaid officials estimated that residents making near double the poverty line would probably pay a \$50 premium. Others would be charged a lower premium on a sliding scale.

"Everyone will pay something, and people enrolled in the program are expected to increase their contribution as their incomes rise," Olszewski said. "Further, everyone ... is expected to take personal responsibility for health behaviors."

Republican members of the Senate Health Policy Committee and the Department of Community Health Appropriations Subcommittee, however, raised some concerns.

One worried that by insuring more people, the demand for health care would rise and raise costs on everyone else. Sen. Tom George, R-Portage, also said people should be nudged to quit smoking and be healthier if they want to get health coverage that's mainly funded by taxpayers.

State officials said they expect private insurers that would partner with the state to encourage health behaviors, but added that details need to be worked out.

Other lawmakers wondered what level of health coverage could actually be provided to uninsured residents. Those details also will be worked out, health officials said.

To pay for the Michigan First Health Partnership, the state is asking the federal government for a waiver to use \$600 million in federal money that has been saved by changing the state's Medicaid prescription drug and fee-for-service plans to less costly alternatives.

The Granholm administration also hopes to get matching dollars for money that private, nonprofit entities spend on the uninsured. The goal is to encourage low-income people, who often wait to seek medical care and visit the emergency room for non-emergency treatment, to regularly visit the doctor.

That would save the health care system in the long run, said Paul Reinhart, the state's Medicaid director.

REPORT NO. --, VOLUME 35
Michigan Report

February 1, 2004

ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS OUTLINE HEALTH CARE PLAN

Governor Jennifer Granholm's proposal to create a health care plan for 550,000 persons that do not now have health insurance is seen as a long-term way of helping reduce overall health care costs and improving business competitiveness, a joint Senate committee was told by administration officials during a hearing on Wednesday. And while details on the financing of the proposal are not yet clear, state officials were confident they could convince the federal government to leverage between \$500 million and \$1 billion needed to finance the proposal.

And if the program does not come into effect, the state could find itself facing even higher medical costs as many uninsured working people will become eligible for Medicaid in future years, the two panels were told.

Community Health Director Janet Olszewski and top DCH officials Paul Reinhart and Fran Wallace did not face particularly tough questioning from the Senate Health Policy Committee and the Appropriations Community Health Subcommittee, as members wanted more details on how the proposal might work.

Several Senate members questioned why the state was putting an emphasis on providing insurance to individuals instead of encouraging healthy behavior to prevent the need to use health care. Ms. Olszewski said the state is encouraging both, and when people have health insurance they intend to use health care in a more appropriate and cost effective manner. People with insurance are less likely to use an emergency room and see a doctor when ill, she said.

Sen. Tony Stamas (R-Midland) said the Senate would have more questions about the program, which administration officials said they hoped would come into operation by April 1, 2007.

Ms. Olszewski and Mr. Reinhart also said the Michigan First Healthcare Plan is in keeping with the kind of innovative programs the federal government is encouraging of states.

Michigan has already lead many states in its management of Medicaid by having recipients participate in managed care operations, and its pharmacy programs have helped the state save money, Ms. Olszewski said. What is hurting the state is the increase in Medicaid caseload and that is related to the state's continuing economic difficulties, she said.

And Mr. Reinhart said the program will be much like a program recently approved for Iowa by the federal government.

Mr. Reinhart said funding for the program will come from federal matching funds. The model for the program will be in part the program used by the state for its adult benefit waiver for mental health care. Under that program the state took \$40 million it was

spending in mental health, redefined its application and was able to win federal matching funds of \$93 million.

Mr. Reinhart said the state and local governments are already spending some \$400 million to help pay the cost of the uninsured health care. If that money can be used as the state's contribution to the program, then it could leverage as much as \$530 million in federal funding.

If that funding is not allowed as the state match, the state will look at what other states have done to win federal funding, Mr. Reinhart said. The state will even argue that the money non-profit hospitals pay for uninsured care should qualify for the federal match if needed, Mr. Reinhart said.

And the program will not be free to participants, Ms. Wallace said. Participants will actually purchase private health care coverage. There will be premium assistance on a sliding scale based on income.

The program would cover adults with incomes up to 200 percent of the poverty line, which for a family of four is more than \$38,000. Mr. Reinhart said the monthly premium for a family in that situation would likely average \$50.

If the federal government grants the waiver for the program then the waiver would likely last for five years. Senate Majority Floor Leader Bev Hammerstrom (R-Temperance) and Senate Appropriations Chair Sen. Shirley Johnson (R-Troy) both raised worries about what would happen to those covered if the waiver is not continued after the five-year period.

While that is a possibility, the DCH officials said, if the program is ended it will not mean the end of either state or federal coverage for those individuals. Many will become eligible for Medicaid and government and business would still find itself helping to cover the cost of uninsured care.

Macomb County

Macomb Co. cuts could cost young nursing home patients

February 2, 2006

BY STEVE NEAVLING
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Shendel and Mollie visit with Helene Azery, 43. The facility could lose annual Macomb County subsidies that make it possible to care for patients too young to receive Medicare benefits.

Before the fall, Henry Chauvin lived an active life. He frequented rock and roll concerts and made ends meet by cutting grass and picking up temporary jobs.

Now the 42-year-old needs a wheelchair and nurse to get by.

Luckily, he said, life is good at the Martha T. Berry Medical Care Facility in Mt. Clemens, a nursing home where a third of the 165 residents are younger than 65.

Nationwide, less than 10% of nursing home residents are in that age group, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Chauvin has had limited use of his legs since hitting his head on a grocery store floor. He came to Martha T. Berry a month or two after the accident and has been there ever since. For the past seven years, he has shared the halls, cafeteria and game rooms with others overcome with multiple sclerosis, Huntington's chorea, head injuries and paralysis early in life.

"It's really, really nice here," Chauvin said last week. "I wouldn't go to another nursing home."

But the future of the Mt. Clemens nursing home and its residents is cloudy. The county spends \$1 million to \$3 million each year to subsidize the center, making it possible to care for patients too young for Medicare benefits. Those dollars were among possible cuts Macomb County commissioners identified earlier this year to close a budget shortfall.

Although county officials said they might delay discussing the cuts until early 2007, Commissioner Don Brown, R-Washington Township, said the county could save taxpayers money by dropping the subsidies and privatizing the home.

"It's a huge strain on the budget," Brown said Wednesday.

Losing the subsidies "would be very devastating," Josephine Savalle-Dunn, administrator of Martha T. Berry, said last week. "It would be very difficult to run this place."

Savalle-Dunn said Martha T. Berry is "the safety net for people who can't get into other nursing homes."

The facility operates on an annual \$21-million budget. Savalle-Dunn said she is working hard to reduce costs and cited past savings that included outsourcing pharmacy services, updating ineffective equipment and freezing job openings.

The nursing home tries to keep residents active with game rooms, social hours and plenty of attention from staff, Savalle-Dunn said.

Rita Shendel and her beloved pooch Mollie visit twice a week to lift spirits. The pair made the rounds last week, peeking in at residents watching television.

"Come here, puppy dog," said Lorie Raska, 42, a pink blanket pulled up to her neck.

Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when she was 27, Raska spends her days watching television and waiting for the day when she can live on her own.

For now, she said, she's comfortable at Martha T. Berry, where she has spent the past four and a half years.

Residents said there's no other nursing home like it.

"I don't call this a nursing home," said Jennifer Kruger, 45, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in her teens and uses a wheelchair.

"A nursing home is where people are old and comatose. This is the only place I would stay."

Contact STEVE NEAVLING at 586-469-4935 or sneavling@freepress.com.

The Wal-Mart law

Thursday, February 02, 2006

Alarmed at the growing evidence that low-paid employees are getting health-care benefits via Medicaid, Maryland has enacted a law that affects only one company -- Wal-Mart. Under the law, companies with at least 10,000 employees in the state must spend at least 8 percent of payroll costs on employee health costs.

Granted, though the law applies only to one company and only in Maryland, it falls into the category of the proverbial "shot heard around the world." So it is worth considering the issue here in Michigan, where Wal-Mart trucks regularly traverse the highways to supply stores in Jackson and many other communities.

Wal-Mart has about 28,000 employees in Michigan. Of those, 3,961 reportedly are enrolled in Medicaid. But guess what? There are also 600 state-government employees on Medicaid. In fact, nearly 180,600 employers in Michigan have employees on Medicaid, according to a list compiled in 2004 by state Democrats.

Should the Michigan Legislature enact a Maryland-style Wal-Mart law? Sounds good -- if you believe that employers have a legal or moral obligation to provide for the health care of employees. That, however, is a peculiarly American notion. As has been highlighted in the debate over health-care costs of the U.S. automakers, most other industrialized nations have national health care. Employers aren't burdened with the expense.

If Michigan were to embrace a Maryland-style law, our guess is that prices would be set higher at Michigan Wal-Mart stores than in other states. And since Michigan would be attempting to mandate a level of health-care coverage in one business, the temptation would be great to do the same to other businesses. Wal-Mart expansion plans in Michigan -- already thwarted by the governor's opposition to a major distribution center proposed for Mt. Pleasant -- would be slowed down. Ask yourself how all of that could impact the state business climate.

It seems to us that, rather than imposing health-care mandates on any employer -- little or big -- the state should be asking why so many working people end up as beneficiaries of Medicaid. In our view, we are watching a major transition unfold before our very eyes. Americans, traditionally so opposed to national health care (or "socialized medicine," as some dub it), are getting a de facto national system. Yes, it is Medicaid. And if we're right, the Maryland law is a futile attempt to stop the inevitable.

--The Jackson Citizen Patriot

Michigan Report

February 1, 2006

D.H.S. SAYS IMPROVEMENTS BEING MADE

After hearing an Office of Children's Ombudsman report last week that said there continued to be instances of Department of Human Service workers not following law or policy when it came to addressing their cases, department officials came before the House Family and Children Services Committee Wednesday to say that improvements are being made to the system.

Office of Family Advocate Director Steve Yeager started off by saying that committee members must put the report into context, stating that the ombudsman's office investigated 136 complaints while DHS looked into more than 76,000. Mr. Yeager also pointed out that the number of findings and recommendations made by the ombudsman has decreased by 68 percent over recent years.

"Our workers are doing a better job," he said. "We take their findings and recommendations seriously."

The report detailed DHS from 2003-2004, but Jim Nye, department director of field operations, said that more training programs for supervisors and safety assessment course for caseworkers are being initiated. There is also an initiative called Family to Family, which is piloted in the state's regional and urban areas and requires the parents, other family members and caseworker to make determinations about a child's placement.

"There is an immediate connection to the family," he said, adding that the department is also establishing computer software in Wayne County in April that would allow caseworkers to track childcare needs, such as placing them in a home in the county and not outside of it where family may not be able to drive and visit.

Other computer software that will be put into rotation allows caseworkers to be at their computer less and be out with family and children assessing their needs, Mr. Nye said.

DHS also intends to start investigating cases where there have been more than three complaints, even if the past complaints have been unsubstantiated, in response to several reports of violent child deaths in the state, Mr. Nye said.

He also responded to how DHS handles workers who have misbehaved, an issue that came up for discussion last week when committee Chair Rep. John Stahl (R-North Branch) had relayed a story about a grandmother who had her grandchildren taken away from her care and no investigation had been conducted to substantiate the original complaint. What

made matters worse, Mr. Stahl said, is that after the grandmother had gone through the trauma of getting the kids back, the same employee was still assigned to the case.

Mr. Nye said employees go through an informal conference first and then if no corrective action is taken by the worker a formal conference is held with a supervisor, which can be followed up by a written reprimand, interim status and then termination if no improvements have been made. In a recent case where a worker was found to not have investigated any of the cases under that person's jurisdiction, the worker simply was let go.

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24
18

Holland custody case adjourned until Feb. 10

A hearing Wednesday that could have determined whether Tim and Lisa Holland can keep custody of their four children was adjourned Wednesday to Feb. 10.

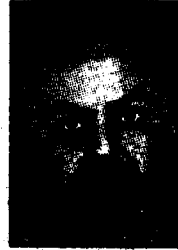
The state has taken temporary custody of the children, who range in age from 1 to 4.

They have been placed with Tim Holland's relatives.

Neither Lisa Holland nor her family are allowed to have contact with them, said Lisa's attorney Mike Nichols. The state is seeking to terminate both of the Hollands' parental rights.

Tim and Lisa Holland are being held on obstruction of justice charges in connection with the death of their 7-year-old adopted son, Ricky, whose remains were found Friday.

Also on Wednesday, prosecutors said they will be dismissing a felonious assault charge filed last week against Lisa Holland; that charge stemmed from a domestic dispute between Lisa and Tim.



T. Holland



L. Holland

Levering man arraigned in sex-related case

By ERICA KOLASKI
Cheboygan Tribune Staff Writer

LEVERING - Emmet County law enforcement officials have released the name of the 49-year-old Levering man who was arrested last week on several sex-related crimes. Jon Paul Michaels was arraigned Wednesday in Emmet County's 90th District Court on five charges of accosting a minor for immoral purposes and one charge of using a computer to commit the crimes.

Emmet County Sheriff Pete Wallin said that Michaels was arrested at his home on Friday without incident.

Wallin said that his detectives are still actively seeking more information related to this case.

"There may be more victims out there we are unaware of," he said.

Wallin said last week that Michaels reportedly wrote several letters and verbally accosted area teens with the intentions of exchanging money for sex.

According to information obtained by detectives, Michaels used a false Yahoo e-mail account in hopes of enticing young teens to have sex or commit sexual acts. Wallin said that the investigation involved area counties in addition to victims in Genesee County.

Anyone with questions or with more information about this case should contact Detective Cpl. J. L. Sumpter at 439-8901 or Detective Corey Rice at 439-8904. Wallin would also like to remind citizens that the department's anonymous tip line is 439-6939.

Teacher faces one trial, possibly a second

Thursday, February 02, 2006

THE SAGINAW NEWS

CARO -- A Cass City Public Schools teacher faces a preliminary examination Friday on charges that he had sexual contact with a former student.

Doug Burtch, 28, faces charges of committing two counts of third-degree criminal conduct with a student and six counts of committing fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct with a student in October 2004. After hearing the evidence, Tuscola County District Judge Kim David Glaspie will decide whether there is enough evidence to try Burtch in Circuit Court.

In a separate sex case, Sanilac County District Chief Judge James A. Marcus has ordered a Circuit Court trial for Burtch on charges of committing third-degree criminal sexual conduct with a student and fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct with a student.

The student, now 19, since has graduated from a Tuscola County high school, where Burtch served as a band teacher. Burtch is on administrative leave.

State police from the Sandusky Post claim the incidents took place at Burtch's home in Sanilac County between December 2003 and May 2004.

State's high court won't hear appeal of child kidnapping

Thursday, February 02, 2006

By Steven Hepker
shepker@citpat.com -- 768-4923

A former Concord woman who hid her son from his father for 15 years has lost her apparent final appeal of a parental kidnapping conviction.

The Michigan Supreme Court announced Wednesday it will not hear the appeal of Terese Moler. That lets stand a June ruling against Moler by the state Court of Appeals.

"I am very glad that this affirms no one is above the law," said Jerrold Schrotenboer, appellate attorney for Jackson County Prosecutor Hank Zavislak.

Moler, who was formerly known as Terese Mason, fled Michigan with 3-year-old Jacob in 1987, after claiming her estranged husband, Joseph Mason, sexually assaulted the boy and was a devil worshipper.

There was never any evidence of her claims. To the contrary, a team of psychologists at the University of Michigan recommended placing Jacob in foster care and agreed Moler could be emotionally abusing her son.

The team said Joseph Mason should be allowed to build a relationship with his son.

That never happened. Moler, with financial backing from her family, hopscotched the country for 15 years, returning to Jackson County in 2002 when Jacob turned 18.

They had lived in Chicago, Indiana, Vermont, Michigan, Colorado, California and Arizona, during which time Moler said she did not have a job or driver's license, and she used an alias to avoid detection.

After refusing to tell Jackson County authorities where Jacob was living, she was jailed for a month for contempt of court. A jury found her guilty of parental kidnapping in September 2005. She served an additional 60 days in jail for the crime.

The defense claimed if there was not abuse, Moler believed there was and was justified in running. Special Prosecutor Joseph Filip contended Moler wanted to punish her ex-husband, and claiming sexual abuse was a sure bet in the 1980s.

Investigators scoffed at her proof. For instance, she accused him of bestiality because he would return from feeding his horses in a good mood. She also said he forced the boy to eat human feces, because Jacob's breath smelled after a visit.

The teen testified he remembered being forced by someone to eat feces as a toddler. He said he did not remember sexual abuse.

The Court of Appeals called it a difficult case and "a close call," but said the prosecution proved beyond a reasonable doubt Moler was guilty.

Moler, through her family, declined comment. Her brother, Daniel Hawkins, said the family stands behind her.

"She listened to her son and did what she did for his safety," Hawkins said. "I certainly admire her for exhausting all of her efforts to take it to the state's highest court."

Joseph Mason, who lives in Battle Creek, could not be reached for comment.

Schrotenboer said the case is effectively done. An appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court is unlikely; the high court hears only about 70 of 10,000 appeals filed yearly.

Child left on parked bus

Wednesday, February 01, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

WALKER -- A child in the Head Start program was left on a bus last week, program Director Phillip Hamberg said today.

A substitute was driving a bus Thursday and apparently left the child at the Walker Avenue bus center, he said.

About 30 minutes after the bus was parked, a staffer saw a student getting off the bus.

"We will take every step to ensure it will not happen again," Hamberg said, adding that discipline for the driver is being considered.

The program transports about 1,400 children, he said.

GOP prepares bill to force release of background check data

2/1/2006, 5:31 p.m. ET

The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — House Republicans on Wednesday proposed legislation that would force the state Department of Education to release the names of felons and sex offenders working in public schools.

House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi, said he was disappointed the Michigan Education Association, the state's largest teachers' union, successfully got a judge to temporarily prevent the state from releasing the information to the public.

"The government in the state of Michigan at all levels has found in many cases too many reasons to keep public information from the public," DeRoche told reporters.

A recent check of about 200,000 school employees revealed more than 4,600 criminal offenses, of which 2,200 were felonies. The checks were prompted by a new law designed to protect kids from sex offenders.

The Detroit News filed a Jan. 23 Freedom of Information Act request for the names of those employees, their job titles and where they work. But the MEA, which is questioning the accuracy of the state's information, asked an Ingham County judge for an injunction blocking the release of the information.

The judge issued the injunction, and a Feb. 10 hearing will be held to determine whether her order will continue.

The Michigan Press Association said Wednesday the information should be made public.

"It's beyond the realm of reason why anybody would want to hide the information that a dangerous school employee is lurking about the classroom," said Mike MacLaren, the group's executive director.

Schools districts this week were to receive letters notifying them if any of their employees have criminal records.

Michigan Report

February 1, 2006

LEGISLATION WOULD FORCE RELEASE OF TEACHER CRIME INFORMATION

Legislation introduced by Rep. Rick Baxter (R-Hanover) and backed by House Speaker Craig DeRoche (R-Novi) would force the Department of Education to release the names of teachers and other school personnel who have been convicted of certain crimes including child sexual abuse crimes. The Ingham Circuit Court blocked the release of the list earlier this week.

"The bottom line is that parents have a right to know whether their children are safe in school," Mr. DeRoche said.

Mr. Baxter said there has been too many reported cases of abuse in public schools for the Legislature to ignore. "Making this information publicly available will aid school districts to weed out the few bad apples in our school system who pose a risk to our kids."

Mike MacLaren, executive director of the Michigan Press Association, said, "It's beyond the realm of reason why anybody would want to hide the information that a dangerous school employee is lurking about the classroom."

But school officials said the department is passing that information on to local districts and, because the court order does not include them, they may be forced to release the names of personnel in their employ.

Michigan Education Association officials, who challenged the Freedom of Information Act requests for the list of names, offenses and where those people worked, have argued they are concerned the list is not accurate. Because the Department of State Police had only names and birth dates to match, they said it was possible there were people who had been convicted of crimes with the same name and birth date as a teacher or other school employee.

Department of Education officials have said it would be the responsibility of the employees and the districts to work out any errors that might be found in the list.

And it then might be required that those districts release the lists, said Tom White, executive director of the Michigan School Business Officials. While he said the group is telling districts to check with their attorneys if they receive a request for the information, he said attorneys he has talked to have generally felt the information was subject to FOIA.

Bill: Unseal files of school staff

Proposal in state House would force release of names of ex-cons

*Marisa Schultz, Christine MacDonald and Gary Heinlein / The Detroit News
February 2, 2006*

Michigan lawmakers introduced legislation Wednesday to force the state Department of Education to publicly release the names of school employees who have been convicted of crimes.

The bill, announced by House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi, is in response to a court decision Monday that temporarily blocks the disclosure of the identities of current school employees who were found recently to have criminal histories.

"The bottom line is that parents have a right to know whether their children are safe in school," DeRoche said.

The Detroit News reported Jan. 22 that a recent review of school employees using a Michigan State Police database revealed more than 4,600 criminal offenses, including 2,200 felonies. The checks found that school employees had been convicted of more than 100 sex crimes, 23 homicides, 11 cases of child abuse, 10 prison or jail escapes, 355 drug felonies and 21 armed robberies.

Following the report, The News filed a Freedom of Information Act request Jan. 23 with the Department of Education to obtain a list of those employees who had criminal histories. On Monday, the day on which The News was to receive a response from the department, lawyers for the Michigan Education Association were granted an emergency temporary restraining order by an Ingham Circuit Court judge to block the release of information.

Officials for the MEA, the state's largest teachers union, say they don't want the list released until the information is verified. Releasing incorrect information could ruin lives, said Margaret Trimer-Hartley, the union's spokeswoman.

"We believe the public has a right to know the truth," she said. "We aren't standing in the way of the public's right to know. We want the information the public gets to be true and correct."

At a minimum the Department of Education has to provide the name, date of birth, race and gender of a school employee to the state police for a background check. However, all of those characteristics don't necessarily need to match the characteristics of a known criminal in the police database for a match to be generated, said Tim Bolles, manager of the police's Identification and Criminal History Section.

While this system is based on math algorithms and widely used, "it's not 100 percent," Bolles said.

"I always say that when you are dealing with name searches there can be false positives in there," Bolles said. The most accurate criminal history check is with fingerprints. But until all school employees are fingerprinted digitally by 2008, state police have to rely on name searches.

The Department of Education sent letters out Wednesday to school districts alerting them if any of their employees were found to have a criminal record, including felony, sex crime, misdemeanor and ordinance violation convictions.

Under tougher new safety laws that took effect Jan. 1, sex crime convictions will result in immediate dismissal. Employees with felony convictions can still work at schools with the permission of the superintendent and school board.

Accuracy concerns have been raised not only about the criminal history results but also about the personnel data the Department of Education provides the police.

When asked about potential errors, education department spokesman Martin Ackley said the employee personnel information used for the checks comes directly from the districts.

"The integrity of the list depends on the information districts input," Ackley said.

You can reach Marisa Schultz at (313) 222-2310 or mschultz@detnews.com.

Around Metro Detroit: Spotlight

Mom, daughter nurture Oakland's abused kids

Shawn D. Lewis / The Detroit News
February 2, 2006

WATERFORD TOWNSHIP -- Kathy Crawford knew she was in the right place when a child offered her a hug and a paper necklace. She earns a living as an administrative assistant, but derives much of her joy from working as a volunteer at the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Oakland County, in the organization's nurturing program.

"Some of these children live in very challenging circumstances, and it's so wonderful to watch the love that is still there," said Crawford, 52, who volunteers three hours a week at the program and is working on a degree in sociology at Oakland University. "We try to round out the rough edges for them."

Volunteering is doubly rewarding for Crawford because her daughter, Kait Crawford, works with her in the nurturing program. Kait, 25, graduated from Oakland University in 2004, and works as an apartment leasing consultant. She hopes to begin a master's degree in counseling in the fall. She began volunteering for the center in 2003, after her mom began in late 2002.

"It makes me feel so good inside to know I'm helping in some small way," Kait Crawford said. "I just love it. I would like to really work for this organization one day because I think it's wonderful to see positive changes in both the parents and the children."

Her mom outlined the program.

"First we were both interviewed to find out where we would fit," Kathy Crawford said. "They decided to place both of us in the nurturing program."

The volunteers work with children, while the parents participate in their own counseling group.

"A leader will present a lesson plan and then we help her perform the program with the kids, which is correlated to what the parents are learning in their group."

It is a 15-week commitment for the families. The volunteers usually work about 3 hours a week.

Kait Crawford said the program is executed within a circle.

"We have circle time where the leader has a topic of discussion, usually about feelings, and how to express anger appropriately," she said. "We may do that for 30-45 minutes, and then we will do a project."

One of those projects was making anger masks.

"The children would make the masks themselves, and then they could wear them at home instead of acting out their anger inappropriately," Kait Crawford said.

Kait said she thinks of Care House as a haven for the children.

"It is a safe environment where the kids can have fun and be themselves," she said. "They can be little kids without the cares of the outside world. And the parents can feel safe too, to confide in others."

You can reach Shawn D. Lewis at (248) 647-8825 or slewis@detnews.com.

Money to benefit youth facility

Thursday, February 02, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

OSCEOLA COUNTY -- A \$28,000 grant will help renovate a residential treatment house at a Hersey youth center.

The grant, from the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Outstate Michigan, will buy new furniture, flooring and appliances at Eagle Village's Ashmun House.

The center's residential treatment program helps children ages 8 to 17 who have been abused, neglected or who are juvenile offenders.

MIRS

February 1, 2006

Uh, We Don't To Do That Madam Governor

Rep. Rick **JONES** (R-Grand Ledge) told *MIRS* today that the newsletter could add another item to its "dead on arrival category" the newsletter set up yesterday (See " [Only Three Granholm Proposals Dead](#)," 1/31/06).

Jones argues that if Gov. Jennifer **Granholm** wants to stiffen penalties for people who cook the toxic narcotic methamphetamine in front of children, she's doing the opposite by suggesting the meth cook be charged with child abuse.

In her prepared State of the State address, the governor said she is sending to the Legislature a bill that will allow prosecutors to charge those who expose children to meth labs with statutory child abuse.

The former Eaton County Sheriff, who busted up his share of meth labs in his day, said running a dangerous meth lab around children is child abuse, but currently it is a 20-year felony to own or possess any chemical or lab equipment used in the production of a controlled substance in the presence of a minor. The highest punishment for child abuse is 15 years in prison.

"This proposal could actually lower the penalty for exposing a child to meth production," Jones said.

Granholm Press Secretary Liz **BOYD** said the governor did not specify in her proposal how long she wanted to lock away people who prepare methamphetamine in front of children.

"We're pleased to know Representative Jones is listening to the governor," Boyd said. "He does not need to worry. She isn't going to lessen penalties for anybody who puts children in harm's way."

Parents need to take precautions to monitor their child's computer use

By Don Reid / Coldwater Daily Reporter Staff Writer

February 2, 2006

COLDWATER — One of the best ways to keep your children safe and prevent improper use of a computer is to keep it where everyone can see it, according to Dan Nichols, the Branch County Sheriff Office cyber crime expert.

Legg Middle School Principal Ron Drzewicki agreed that students should not have computers in their rooms. "Parents need to check the computer," he explained. "Know what your kids are doing."

Nichols tells parents "Be nosy. You do want to know what's going on," said Nichols.

DeRoche Pushing FOIA Issue

Today, House Speaker Craig **DeROCHE** (R-Novi) announced he would pursue legislation to force the Department of Education to release the names of "convicted felons and sex offenders" working in public schools.

The issue basically pits the news media, particularly the Michigan Press Association (MPA), against the Michigan Education Association (MEA). This could make things awkward for Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM**. Especially if a bill gets to her desk in a hurry, which is expected.

"I'm making this a priority," the Speaker told reporters today on the House floor.

In addition, the DeRoche news release included, what sounded like a direct challenge to the Governor. It stated: *DeRoche repeated his hope the Granholm administration would release the information, but said the House would begin work on this legislation if they do not.*

"I am hopeful we can pass this legislation quickly and put it on the governor's desk," DeRoche added.

The proposed legislation DeRoche announced today would mandate the disclosure of the records under FOIA. The records would include anything compiled by the Department of Education or Michigan State Police in connection to the Student Safety Initiative and regarding a felony conviction or a misdemeanor conviction involving sexual or physical abuse.

"Too many cases of abuse in our public schools have been reported for us to turn our backs and ignore this threat," said Rep Rick **BAXTER** (R-Hanover), who will sponsor the legislation.

As reported Tuesday (See "[DeRoche Sides With Media](#)," 1/31/06), a recent ruling involving the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) came down on the side of the MEA and against *The Detroit News*. Ingham County Judge Joyce **DRAGANCHUK** issued a temporary restraining order to block release of the names of employees in the state's education system that are convicted felons or sex offenders. A Feb. 10 hearing has been scheduled to determine whether the injunction will continue.

The Detroit News filed a FOIA request with the state to get the names, their job titles and the school districts for which they work. These records would include anything compiled by the Department of Education or Michigan State Police in connection to the Student Safety Initiative and regarding a felony conviction or a misdemeanor conviction involving sexual or physical abuse.

"The court order is prohibiting local news outlets from obtaining the names, keeping families and unsuspecting communities in the dark," said Mike **MACLAREN**, executive director of the MPA. "It's beyond the realm of reason why anybody would want to hide the information that a dangerous school employee is lurking about the classroom,"

But the MEA asked Dranganchuk for the injunction against immediate release of the names, arguing that there's a high likelihood that the lists of names include inaccuracies.

"Nobody knows for sure about the accuracy of these lists," said Al **SHORT**, director of government affairs for the MEA. "When they (lawmakers) passed that legislation (the Student Safety Initiative), they didn't know the scope of what they were doing. This could involve people in positions such as bus drivers and employees who have been around for years."

The Student Safety Initiative legislation (See "[Republicans Unveil Student Safety Initiative](#)," 06/14/05) passed and was signed into law last year, after newspaper accounts showed that there were felons and sex offenders in the state education system. The legislation required background checks on all paid school employees and restrictions regarding the employment of sex offenders.

It also created Student Safety Zones by prohibiting convicted sex offenders from living, working or loitering within 1,000 feet of a school and revoking teaching certification for convicted sex offenders.

However, one problem which repeatedly arose as the legislation made its way through the Legislature was that the state's sex offender registry includes individuals that virtually no one would consider to be sexual predators - such as people who years ago had consensual sex with minors who were close to their own age — such as an 18-year-old with a 15-year-old.

But in his news release today the Speaker made it clear that he does not believe the issue is about such non-threats.

"This is not about embarrassing or upsetting the lives of those who are not a threat," DeRoche said. "Making this information publicly available will aid local school districts to weed out the few bad apples in our school system who pose a risk to our kids."

MIRS asked DeRoche spokesman Matt **RESCH** if the Speaker is really certain that none of the names on the list would be some of those so-called Romeo & Juliet cases or others that the average person would not consider to be a legitimate "sex offender."

"I believe we're talking about the State Police data base, not the sex registry list," Resch said.

MIRS asked Resch whether or not he knows the extent to which the sex offender registry list and the state police database may overlap.

In response, Resch said he wasn't certain about any overlap issue, but it was his understanding the lists in question do not include the, arguably flawed, sex offender registry.

MIRS asked Short if he believes the Speaker's call for the legislation to be premature.

"I'd say it's premature, yes," Short said.

MIRS asked Short if he thinks the Speaker is playing politics with the issue.

"A hearing has been scheduled for Feb. 10," Short said. "That's the process. This will be dealt with long before any legislation would go through."

February 1, 2006

HOUSE APPROVES BACKGROUND CHECKS

Background checks would be required for nursing homes and adult foster care centers under legislation approved by the House on Wednesday.

The lower chamber also concurred in Senate substitutes for legislation that would require background checks for mental and health facilities ([HB 5168](#) and [HB 5448](#)), sending those bills to the governor's desk.

The Senate still has to concur in the House substitutes and amendments made to [SB 621](#) and [SB 622](#) before they go to Governor Jennifer Granholm. The bills were approved by 98-4 and 99-3 votes, respectively. Those who voted against the legislation said that government shouldn't impose more mandates on businesses and that businesses should be doing their own background checks in the first place.

The legislation will allow the state to receive \$5 million in federal funds to pay for the background checks.

"This legislation will have a real impact on the safety and security of the residents of these facilities," said [Rep. Barb Vander Veen](#) (R-Allendale), who sponsored HB 5448. "It is a tool for us to help maintain the trust we place in caretakers of these facilities, and ensure that residents receive the best available care and attention, without fear for their well-being."

Published February 2, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Rusty Hills: Background checks protect our parents

I am writing in vigorous opposition to the LSJ's recent editorial on criminal background checks ("Background checks are fine, but key issue is financial," Jan. 4).

Here is the history: After several cases involving abuse of the elderly by workers at residential-care facilities, Attorney General Mike Cox launched two comprehensive studies. The results were eye-opening: Almost 10 percent of employees caring for Michigan's vulnerable adults - our moms and dads - have criminal backgrounds.

And we're not talking about unpaid parking tickets. The criminal backgrounds of some of these employees include homicide, criminal sexual conduct, weapons charges and drug offenses.

One residential-care facility even went so far as to post an application for employment policy that stated: "The company does not discriminate on the basis of arrest record"!

That is why the attorney general felt compelled to back legislation to provide an added measure of security. The legislation championed by Mike Cox, and overwhelmingly supported by Democrats and Republicans in the state Senate, would require Michigan's 5,000 residential-care facilities to conduct criminal background checks of all new employees. It would also create a database of residential-care facility employees to continually monitor future criminal convictions.

This is a common sense reform that provides an additional blanket of security for Michigan seniors and vulnerable adults, as well as peace of mind to their children and relatives. And this issue will only loom larger, because Michigan's population is aging. More and more moms and dads will be entering residential-care facilities this year, and for years to come.

Michigan has been awarded a federal grant to pay for a three-year pilot program.

The funding is \$25 million for fiscal years 2004 through 2007. Michigan's share comes to \$5 million, which is the cost of criminal background checks and patient abuse prevention training.

Moreover, to obtain this information - an FBI/State Police fingerprint check - a one-time cost of \$54 is required. I disagree with the LSJ and argue that it is not unreasonable to require this one-time expenditure to help ensure the safety of our mothers, fathers,

grandparents and relatives by disclosing criminal background histories of employees at residential care facilities.

Everyone in Michigan is going through budget problems, from schools to police departments. That doesn't mean we stop educating our children or policing our streets. Attorney General Mike Cox and state senators from both parties are right to urge Michigan to adopt this common sense reform.

Rusty Hill is communications director for the Attorney General's Office.

MIRS

February 1, 2006

Health Care Employee Background Check Bill Clears House

Today, the House overwhelmingly passed legislation that would let Michigan pull down \$5 million in federal money so criminal background checks can be run on nursing homes, adult foster care and mental health facilities employees

Michigan law does not require all long-term care establishments to perform criminal background checks on employees. The House approved the four-bill package, which serves as a mechanism to weed out potential abusers from accessing the most vulnerable members of society.

The bills would expand and strengthen the requirements for criminal background checks for employees, which include FBI national criminal history checks. Rep. Barb **VANDER VEEN** (R-Allendale), a registered nurse and chair of the House Senior Health, Security and Retirement committee, said the legislation would help protect these vulnerable citizens by keeping criminals out of long-term care and health care establishments.

"Michigan is fortunate to be participating in this federal pilot program, and we are very excited about this package of legislation," Vander Veen said. "This legislation will have a real impact on the safety and security of the residents of these facilities. It is a tool for us to help maintain the trust we place in caretakers of these facilities, and ensure that residents receive the best available care and attention, without fear for their well-being."

Vander Veen is the sponsor of one of the bills in the package, HB 5448, which would prohibit the hiring or contracting of individuals who have direct access to residents or patients and who have been convicted of a felony or a misdemeanor involving neglect, abuse, assault, battery, criminal sexual conduct, drug violations or fraud.

People who have served their sentence and remained crime-free for a specified period of time may be eligible for employment in the future. The legislation will require psychiatric facilities to request that the state police conduct a criminal background check on potential employees.

HB 5448 is tie-barred to the other three bills in the package, HB 5168 and SB 0621 and SB 0622. All bills are expected to be sent to the governor on Thursday.

Trio targeted elderly, cops say

Men intended to kill victims -- Flint police

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION
Thursday, February 02, 2006

By Paul Janczewski and Kim Crawford pjanczewski@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6333

The three Flint men hatched a plot to break in and rob people least likely to foil their plan - the elderly in their own homes, police say.

And they planned to leave no witnesses behind, with one telling police that "anyone inside would die."

Today, the three are behind bars, facing multiple life felonies for allegedly shooting and killing Green Wedlow, 75, and his wife, Catherine, 74, on Jan. 27 and stabbing to death Robert Vondrasek, 75, two days later.

In a courtroom packed with relatives of the three victims, Sherman M. Buggs, 23, Demitray L. Hodge, 26, and Jerry O. Walker, 17, listened as Flint District Judge William H. Crawford II read their charges.

Buggs faces 21 felony counts, while Walker faces 19 charges and Hodge 10. As the charges were read, gasps could sometimes be heard among the courtroom audience, followed by silent sobs and tears.

Among the counts some face are first-degree murder, armed robbery, home invasion, conspiracy, carjacking, arson and weapons charges.

Earlier, Genesee County Prosecutor David Leyton announced the charges in a news conference and said public assistance was vital in helping crack the cases.

"The public cooperated in this investigation," he said, lauding the round-the-clock efforts of Flint police Sgts. Shawn Ellis and Jeff Collins.

Leyton urged residents to keep an eye on themselves and their neighbors to "help protect your community."

In the past, police and prosecutors said the reluctance of residents to share information about crimes they may have witnessed or have knowledge about hindered police investigations.

Flint Police Chief Gary Hagler said other units in the department aided in the quick arrests of the three within days of the slayings and instituted search warrants, but public assistance was "instrumental" in cracking the cases.

The Wedlows were found shot to death in their home at 622 E. York Ave. on Friday. Vondrasek, who lived several blocks away, was found stabbed multiple times in his burning residence at 154 E. Russell Ave. early Monday morning.

The three suspects all lived in the same area, Leyton said, and are being held without bond in the Genesee County Jail awaiting Friday pretrial hearings, at which their court-appointed attorneys will receive investigative materials from police and preliminary examination dates.

Hagler and Leyton said a resident who witnessed suspicious activity after the homicides called police, which eventually led to the arrests. But both were tight-lipped about other facts of the case, saying information would come out in court.

Leyton said police have talked to all three suspects but declined to say if they confessed.

He said he does not believe anyone else was involved with the trio, which he described not as a gang but as a loosely knit "crew."

He said the three killed Vondrasek because "they thought they were on a roll" after the Wedlow slayings.

While swearing out the warrants before the arraignments, Collins and Ellis told the judge that the three wanted money and valuables during their crime spree. Two suspects - Hodge and Walker - gave statements to investigators after they were arrested early Monday, the officers testified.

The officers said Walker told them that the men had agreed that "anyone inside would die."

All three of the suspects were involved in the late-Sunday night break-in and slaying of Vondrasek, investigators said.

Walker told them that Hodge pistol-whipped Vondrasek with Buggs' .22-caliber revolver, forcing him to open a safe, Collins testified.

Walker told them Hodge and Buggs stabbed Vondrasek before they ransacked his residence, set fire to his bed and left in his car.

The detectives said Walker also told how he and Buggs forced their way into the Wedlows' residence a few nights earlier. Walker allegedly said Buggs shot the couple before both ransacked this residence, taking jewelry and cash.

Police said residents noticed three men lurking near the home of another elderly woman on Lippincott Boulevard near McPhail Street on Monday morning. Walker and Hodge were arrested, while Buggs initially escaped.

The two suspects had property belonging to Green Wedlow and Vondrasek when arrested, the detectives testified.

Ellis told the judge that the handgun used in the slayings was discarded by Hodge shortly before he was arrested and hasn't been found yet.

Hodge and Buggs both have prior felony convictions - Hodge for armed robbery and Buggs for prison escape and home invasion. Buggs also was charged as a teenager with home invasion.

Walker was charged as a juvenile in July 2004 for killing a dog in his neighborhood. He was held for a time in juvenile detention and wore an electronic tether, but the case was dismissed eight months later when it was shown that he complied with court orders.

Michigan Report

February 1, 2006

PROPOSED RULES ON SUPPORT ORDERS ISSUED

Courts may soon have greater authority to enter child support orders earlier in child custody or support cases and the guideline for the formula used to calculate reimbursement could be replaced under proposed amendments offered Wednesday by the Supreme Court.

The first proposed amendment would allow courts to enter a child support order at a dispositional hearing as long as the court follows the Michigan Child Support Formula and the Uniform Support Formula.

Another amendment would replace the 1990 Schedule of Payments in the guideline for court ordered reimbursement in juvenile cases.

The Supreme Court said it is considering this change because many trial courts report already using the more current Michigan Child Support Formula to enter reimbursement orders.

Another proposed change states that claims that are the subject of motions for remand require development of facts not of record with the submission of an affidavit or other proof of the facts to be established at a hearing.

Failure To Pay Child Support Has Six-Year Statute

A man asked to pay back child support more than six years after the fact can not be touched for criminal charges, the state Supreme Court ruled today. State law creates a six-year statute of limitations on child support cases, not 10 years as was argued before the court.

That finding came in *People v Monaco* (No. 126852). Vito **MONACO**, was charged in the Macomb Circuit Court with a felony for failing to pay court-ordered child support more than eight years after his support obligation ended. The defendant moved to dismiss the charge, arguing that the action was barred under the six-year period of limitations.

The court denied his claim on the basis that a 10-year period of limitations applied. The Court of Appeals affirmed on different grounds, holding that the six-year period of limitations governed the action and that failure to pay child support constituted a continuing violation and that the period of limitations never began to run under the continuing violation theory.

In a decision signed by Chief Justice Clifford **TAYLOR** and Justices Michael **CAVANAGH**, Maura **CORRIGAN** and Stephen **MARKMAN**, the court held that the six-year limit does apply. But that the Court of Appeals erred in finding that failure to pay child support was a continuing offense.

"The legislature did not intend a violation ... to be an offense that continues until an individual's monetary support obligation is fully discharged," wrote the court. "Under the plain language, the crime of felony nonsupport is complete when an individual fails to pay support in the amount ordered at the time ordered."

Six-Year Limit Applies To Case

The Michigan Supreme Court today held that an architect can be sued for up to six-years after making "an improvement to real property."

That finding came in the case of *Ostroth v Warren Regency, GP LLC*, where three people brought suit in Macomb County against an architect and others over environmental hazards that resulted from a renovation project at their workplace.

The lower court held that because it was improvement, a six-year statute of limitations applied. The defendant architect had argued that a two-year period applied. The Supreme Court today upheld the lower court's ruling.

The opinion was written by Justice Elizabeth **WEAVER** and joined in by Chief Justice Clifford **TAYLOR** and Justices Michael **CAVANAGH**, Maura **CORRIGAN**, Robert **YOUNG** and Stephen **MARKMAN**.

REPORT NO. --, VOLUME 35
Michigan Report

February 1, 2006

CHILD SUPPORT OBLIGATION ENDS AFTER SIX YEARS

Custodial parents who can escape paying child support for at least six years after the support order expires, and who can avoid having criminal charges filed during that time, can at least avoid any criminal penalties, the Supreme Court ruled Wednesday.

The court, in a split per curiam opinion, ruled that the felony child support non-payment law carries a six-year statute of limitations and that the clock begins to run when the support order expires.

The order dismissed charges against Vito Monaco, who was charged in Macomb Circuit Court eight years after the support order expired.

The trial court had found the crime was subject to a 10-year statute of limitation. The Court of Appeals ruled the crime had to be charged within six years, but said the clock did not begin to run until the back support was paid, which Mr. Monaco had not yet done.

Chief Justice Clifford Taylor, joined by Justices Michael Cavanagh, Maura Corrigan, Robert Young and Stephen Markman, ruled the crime is complete at the time a payment is late or insufficient. They said the statute of limitations begins to run, then, from the due date of the payment.

Justice Marilyn Kelly, joined by Justice Elizabeth Weaver, departed from the rest of the court in agreeing with the Court of Appeals that the felony continues as long as support remains unpaid.

Wrongly imprisoned man faces new challenge

Thursday, February 02, 2006

By John Agar

MUSKEGON CHRONICLE NEWS SERVICE

After 13 years in prison, Larry Souter found out freedom isn't free: He owes \$38,000 in back child support.

Never mind that the debt accumulated while he was locked up, wrongly convicted of murder. Souter, 53, was ordered to court Wednesday to explain why he shouldn't be held in contempt. If the hearing had not been postponed, his answer was simple: He was in prison before his second-degree murder conviction was overturned late last year. Prison wages barely covered necessities. Souter didn't want to talk, but the courthouse certainly was on his list of least favorite places to visit.

He was convicted in 1992 for the 1979 killing of Kristi Ringler, 19, near White Cloud. His attorneys later found evidence that could have helped him at trial, reports suggesting the victim actually was hit by a motor home's mirror. Medical examiners also backed off conclusions that Ringler was killed by a whiskey bottle.

A Newaygo County judge vacated Souter's guilty verdict, and he was released in April 2005. In 1987, Souter was ordered to pay \$100 a week in his divorce with Christine Souter. He stopped paying when he went to prison in 1992 but didn't ask to have payments suspended until 1995. Court documents show that in 1997, he owed \$23,000 in back support. As of last month, interest and penalties had pushed it to \$38,082.25.

Federal law prohibits judges from retroactively wiping out such debts, Souter's attorney, John Smietanka, said.

He hoped they could reach an agreement with his ex-wife.

"He can't even find a job, let alone find this kind of payment," Smietanka said. "Larry wants to (pay), he definitely wants to deal with this in a fair way."

His ex-wife's attorney, David Sarnacki, wrote in court records that she "has endured the substantial burden of raising her two children without defendant's contribution of child support."

Macomb Briefs
Detroit News
February 2, 2006

Order protects woman against her mother

An 18-year-old woman who recanted the story that she was kidnapped and assaulted by her boyfriend in December has received a personal protection order against her mother. Nicole Carter filed the order against Susan LaColla Carter, 40, in Macomb County Circuit Court this week. Nicole Carter's boyfriend, James Garvin, pleaded guilty last week to a misdemeanor domestic violence charge after Nicole Carter testified that she had not been held against her will, as police had alleged.

Homeless resent effort to get them off streets

They know city wants them out of sight

Brad Heath / The Detroit News
February 2, 2006

DETROIT -- On a dreary patch of sidewalk -- away from the cameras and the parties and the crowds -- the Super Bowl is an unwelcome spectacle to Robert Collins. He's certain the city doesn't want him anywhere near it.

"Just for the Super Bowl, they want to pick up the homeless and get us out of the way?" Collins said, shaking his head.

Homeless since he was released from prison two years ago, Collins said he scrounges enough money to rent a room when he can. On other nights, he shelters himself in the concrete lee of freeway bridges.

"You don't go picking people up unless you've got someplace to really help them. That said, if you're going to do something, it can't just be for a day."

The Super Bowl -- its crowds and attendant media glare -- has arrived in Detroit, and with it has come an odd contradiction for the city's homeless. The city's shelters are staying open longer hours, serving extra meals, even bringing in big-screen TVs to show the big game.

But there is an unmistakable sense among many of the homeless that the city wants them out of the way while the world is watching Detroit.

"We understand the Super Bowl doesn't want homeless folks in the way of their parties and all that, and we don't want to be a part of sweeping that under the rug," said Bill Weld-Wallis, a vice president of Neighborhood Service Organization, one of a handful of groups partnering to expand homeless services this week.

Starting Friday, advocacy groups are throwing a three-day party for the homeless at the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries' activity center near downtown. They'll serve meals, have games and clothing giveaways and bring in televisions Sunday night for the game.

Organizers don't deny the party is part of an effort to keep the homeless out of the Super Bowl's way. But they said they have high hopes that it will give them a chance to match people who have slipped past society's safety nets with the drug counseling or mental health treatment many of them need. "We understand the city's not going to let these folks be in the way, so how can we take advantage of that and use it to benefit the homeless?" Weld-Wallis said.

Advocates and civil rights groups said they had received no complaints about police enforcement this week, but added they expect authorities will act swiftly if they see people panhandling or sleeping in public.

Even around downtown, many homeless people said the police have so far left them pretty much alone -- although they worry it won't last.

"It's tougher this week. They seem to think we'll hassle out-of-town people," said James Yeager, who lives in a shelter for veterans not far from downtown.

Yeager doesn't plan to hassle anyone. But he's not staying away. He works for a vendors at Ford Field and plans to be there Sunday, serving beer during the Super Bowl.

Detroit police spokesman James Tate said officers will refer people who appear to be homeless to appropriate services. But he said if people are obeying the law, police cannot force them to leave.

Wilmer Alexander makes no pretense.

"I am a beggar," he said, trudging over a bridge near Comerica Park this week, wrapped in a frayed black coat.

"This is my home," he mumbled.

Then he flashed with anger: "The world is going to watch for a day. What about the day after that?"

Advocates for the homeless said they hope their Super Bowl plans lead to better permanent services.

"We're not telling them we want them off the street for the heck of it," said Chad Audi, chief operating officer of the Detroit Rescue Mission.

"We're saying there is a place you can go to get services. If you need a meal, we're going to provide you with a meal. If you need treatment, you'll get that, too."

The Rescue Mission has secured enough donations to keep its shelters open 24 hours a day until mid-April.

But the Neighborhood Service Organization and others said their extra efforts will end almost as soon as the game does.

You can reach Brad Heath at (313) 222-2563 or bheath@detnews.com.

New low-income homes planned

Thursday, February 02, 2006

By Bea Boucher
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Though he lived briefly on the streets, Donald Norman's home of eight years has been a small, one-room apartment at Dwelling Place Inn.

It is a spartan existence for the 50-year-old Grand Rapids native, who keeps perishable food in a red cooler on the floor of his room.

Norman has just enough room for a twin bed, dresser, chairs and a television, his possessions stacked along the walls.

He is among a half-dozen residents lucky to have a toilet and a sink in his room. He shares a communal shower.

Norman is looking forward to relocating to more spacious quarters next year when the new Verne Barry Place opens on South Division Avenue.

Construction is scheduled to begin in April on the \$16.2 million project, which will replace the 88-unit inn. The project includes construction of a five-story apartment building on a parking lot just south of the inn at 44 1/2 S. Division Ave. and renovation of existing apartments housed in three former hotels nearly a century old.

The inn, and its replacement provide subsidized housing for people who are homeless or have special needs.

The building will be named in honor of the late Verne Barry, a local advocate for the homeless. When completed in fall 2007, the energy-efficient "green" Verne Barry Place will have 116 studio apartments.

The new building will have 72 studio apartments along with a two-level parking lot with 42 spaces. The existing apartments at the inn will be renovated into 44 more studio apartments. Support services will remain for residents who otherwise might not be able to make it on their own.

Each new unit will have a kitchenette with a two-burner stove, a refrigerator and a sink, as well as a bathroom and shower. The complex will be barrier-free with elevators, and eight of the units will be wheelchair accessible. The current facility does not have an elevator. The complex will be air-conditioned.

The project's developer, Heartside Nonprofit Housing Corp., is a subsidiary of Dwelling Place of Grand Rapids.

The corporation received a \$500,000 grant from Federal Home Loan Bank's Affordable Housing Program to help fund construction.

Additional funding includes \$10.6 million in low-income housing tax credits, \$2 million from the state Housing Development Authority, \$550,000 in grants from Steelcase, Frey and Grand Rapids Community foundations and other city and state funds.

A project of this size would not happen without multiple funding sources, said Dennis Sturtevant, chief executive officer of Dwelling Place.

As the downtown area continues to expand, Sturtevant said it is important low-income residents not be displaced.

By adding 28 new units to those offered at Dwelling Place, developers hope to make up units that were lost when the downtown YMCA closed.

As part of an ongoing effort to create a magnet for arts businesses along Division Avenue, Dwelling Place will continue providing commercial space on lower levels for arts-related firms, Sturtevant said.

To build that project, an additional several hundred thousand dollars are needed, Sturtevant said. Hopes are to establish an endowment for the building and ongoing management.

Furniture donations also are being sought for the new units. When Dwelling Place renovated the former Ferguson Hospital for low-income residents, it received hotel furniture from the former Harley Hotel.

Such projects are about helping such folks as Norman.

He says having a larger apartment and new surroundings will help make it seem more like home for him.

"It feels good to feel good sometimes," Norman said.

"When you have your own, it feels good."

2/2/2006 11:00:00 AM

Petoskey News Review

United Way sets fundraising record with 2006 campaign

From Staff Reports

The St. Joseph County United Way surpassed its fundraising goal by more than \$25,000, raising a total of \$676,075.

The campaign concluded Tuesday, with this year's pledged amount being an all-time high for the local United Way.

"It was a tough campaign year, with the challenges of Hurricane Katrina and the tsunami," said Kelly Hostetler, executive director of the St. Joseph County United Way. "Thirty days ago, our executive committee was looking at the possibility of reallocating funds to our agencies, and made the decision to notify the community of our struggle of reaching our goal.

"Our plea for help was answered by many people in the community who sent additional individual gifts. We received contributions from the employees at Lear, and last-minute corporate donations from Fifth Third Bank, Wal-Mart, and Eaton Corporation. Once again, the community has come through to show their support of the 43 local agencies we fund, and for that we are very grateful," she said.

The Victory Celebration will be held 4-6 p.m. Feb. 9 at The Carriage Place in Sturgis.

The event is being sponsored by Ross Laboratories.

The public is invited to the event and may RSVP by calling the St. Joseph County United Way office at 467-9099.

Granholt supports raising minimum wage

By Michelle Yaremchuk
Western Herald Senior Writer

February 02, 2006

Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm promised to press for an increase in minimum wage within the year in her State of the State address Wednesday, bringing added support to a local campaign dedicated to raising the minimum wage in the state.

The current minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour has not seen an increase in nine years.

"I pledge to you this evening, those workers will get that increase this year," Granholm said in her address.

"I was the first person in the state to sign the petition to put this question on the ballot in November," she said. "I'll be the first to vote yes. If this Legislature is not willing to raise the minimum wage in our state, the voters of Michigan will."

In a partnership between Western Michigan University students and Kalamazoo College students, The Kalamazoo Raise the Wage Coalition has been set up to support the ballot proposal that would bring the state's minimum wage up to \$6.85 per hour, beginning Jan. 1, 2007. The proposal also aims to increase the minimum wage according to the rate of inflation.

Granholm's support does good things for the Kalamazoo Raise the Wage Coalition, according to Michael Gregor, a sophomore majoring in political science and a coordinator of the program.

"It just kind of shows that it [the focus of the Coalition] has broad support among many influential people, many influential groups," he said.

Granholm's support also illustrates that people care about the fate of Michigan workers and realize that \$5.15 per hour is not what the minimum wage should be, Gregor added.

"Right now, someone who works full time and makes \$5.15 an hour makes about \$10,700 a year, which is below the federal poverty line for a family of three," he said. "We're also seeing a lot of homeless people working minimum wage jobs and they cannot afford rent in their cities."

Low-income wages don't keep up with the rising costs of everyday essentials such as food, rent and heat, he said, and a show of support from Granholm shows that people are realizing that Michigan needs a change that will help both employees and the economy.

An increase in minimum wage will help workers get out of poverty, rather than keep them in poverty.

Volunteers for the Kalamazoo Raise the Wage Coalition are currently collecting signatures around the city for petitions for the proposal.

"It's going really well," Gregor said. "We've got a lot of excited students and community volunteers who are helping us ... but we can always use more volunteers," he said.

Anyone interested in volunteering with the Kalamazoo Raise the Wage Coalition can visit its Web site at www.rso.wmich.edu/raisethewage.

Stupak: 'Bush failed to address plight of middle class'

BY FRED GRAY

Petoskey NEWS-REVIEW STAFF WRITER

Wednesday, February 1, 2006 2:26 PM EST

Congressman Bart Stupak, D-Menominee, responding to President Bush's State of the Union speech Tuesday night, said the president offered hope and encouragement to the American people but his rhetoric failed to match the realities facing middle class families.

Stupak, who represents most of Northern Michigan in Congress, said he was "disappointed" in the president's speech which he said tried to put a positive spin on everything but left out the real priorities of America, which include escalating home heating and health care costs.

Speaking with Northern Michigan reporters for over an hour after the speech, Stupak said:

"I do believe we need words of encouragement to persevere in these challenging times. But it is one thing to offer support and direction and quite another to completely ignore the realities most families face as they struggle from paycheck to paycheck."

Stupak said he was "shocked" at Bush's misrepresentation of the nation's current and future deficit, which he said is growing rapidly, and said Bush's rosy picture of the nation's economic health failed to address the economic problems facing Michigan.

"We Michiganders know better than anyone that when the President says the economic state of the union has never been stronger, he's not speaking for the manufacturing states in the union," Stupak said.



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

St. Clair County collaborative receives \$100,000 Great Start Collaborative grant

Early Childhood Investment Corporation grants focus on early childhood development and care

February 2, 2006

LANSING – Today the superintendent of the St. Clair County RESA will join board members of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) and local legislators to celebrate a \$100,000 grant to support a local Great Start Collaborative that will strengthen early childhood development and care in St. Clair County.

Michigan Department of Human Services director Marianne Udow and ECIC chief operating officer Mike Foley will present a ceremonial check to Dan DeGrow, superintendent of the St. Clair County RESA.

From the day she took office, Governor Jennifer M. Granholm has maintained that early childhood development and care is a critical investment in the economic viability of the state.

"Children learn more from birth to age three than at any other time, setting the stage for future success in school and in life," Granholm said. "High-quality early childhood development and care is a wise investment in our children and our economy."

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation, which the Governor announced in her 2005 State of the State address, is developing the framework for effective early childhood development and care programs through partnerships with local collaboratives around the state. The local Great Start Collaboratives will use the grant money from the ECIC to conduct a community assessment and develop a strategic plan for the development of a comprehensive system of early childhood services and supports, accessible to all children from birth to kindergarten and their families.

"These grants will help bring together the public and private sectors, including government, business, civic, faith, education, and community groups to develop a long-standing, sustained focus on early learning and childhood development," said Mike Foley. "The board was able to award this first round of grants with the resources currently available, and is committed to funding Great Start Collaboratives throughout the state as new funding sources are identified."

Intermediate school districts will act as fiduciaries for the grants. In addition to St. Clair County RESA, 13 other ISDs and RESAs around the state were also awarded funding for planning and/or implementation of Great Start Collaboratives.

-MORE-

“Children who participate in high-quality early childhood development programs are better prepared to enter elementary school, are more likely to pursue secondary education and have lower dropout rates and higher high school graduation rates,” DHS Director Marianne Udow said. “By improving the skills of a large fraction of the workforce, these programs for poor children will reduce poverty and strengthen the state’s ability to compete in the global market.”

For more information about the ECIC and Great Start Collaboratives, visit the Project Great Start Web site at www.michigan.gov/greatstart